



The Brass Ceiling (Transcript)

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Behind The Screen series, Part Two of Four

Max Cardilli (00:00): Welcome to ESO Offstage and to our “Behind the Screen” series, looking into the past, present and future of orchestral auditions. This episode, we look into the history of the screened audition and how it has influenced women's representation in orchestras.

[MUSIC - 00:19]

Maria Rachwal (00:28): The screened edition wasn't always used in Canadian symphony orchestras or orchestras in North America for that matter. You got into an orchestra by knowing people in the orchestra, by knowing the conductor. There were a lot of gender biases of course because the European models were all male orchestras and so conductors also wanted to model these Canadian orchestras after those in Europe.

My name is Maria Rachwal, I'm a musicologist and my main area of interest is women in music and Canadian Orchestras. I'm also a flautist, and the author of the book [“From Kitchen to Carnegie Hall: Ethel Stark and the Montreal Women’s Symphony Orchestra”](#).

[MUSIC - 01:08]

Maria Rachwal (01:11): The classical music world was deeply informed by gender norms. Victorian ideology stressed music as a domestic accomplishment, women were encouraged to study music in order to enhance their chances of getting married or moving up in the social ladder. Taking music lessons, along with embroidery and painting, was considered part of the proper education of a lady of the middle or upper class. However, achieving professional competence on a musical instrument was considered abnormal because playing an instrument was a skill that required physical stamina and rational faculties - characteristics that were associated with masculinity.

Rules of etiquette also dictated that only certain instruments were acceptable for women. For example, the piano, the harpsichord, and the guitar required women to sit for long periods of time - reinforcing a kind of bourgeois domesticity. The cello was a very controversial instrument because of the way that the woman would have to sit to play it. Other instruments like woodwinds, brass, percussion had very strong masculine and military connotations. They also require the distortion of facial features, and so were considered highly inappropriate for young women.

European orchestras have a long tradition of being “boys only” clubs. Even after the adoption of the screen, we have seen a lot of cases of just outright discrimination where players themselves are still holding on to that tradition. For example, in 1982 when Sabine Meyer auditioned for the position of Principal Clarinet in the Berlin Philharmonic, she made it past the screen and emerged as the winner. The music director, Herbert von Karajan is fine with that, but the players were not okay with it because they have



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been an all-male orchestra for a very long time. In the end they voted against her and she was asked to leave.

There was also the case of Abbie Conant auditioning on the trombone for the Munich Philharmonic in 1980. They had mistakenly written her name as “Herr Conant” - Mr. Conant. So, when she played behind the screen and emerged as the winner, they were shocked to find out she was a woman. The sexism in the orchestra ultimately led to her being demoted to second trombone and had her paid less than her male colleagues. This gender discrimination led to a 13-year legal battle, in which she had to endure many trials including being forced to submit to a physical exam to see if she was “fit” to play her instrument. Ultimately, she won the case, and went on to have a tenured position at the State Conservatory of Music in Trossingen.

Max Cardilli (03:46): Our assistant Principal Trombone, Kathy MacIntosh, spoke to me about her experience auditioning for the ESO back in 1983.

Kathy Macintosh (03:56): I think in retrospect it was a very unusual audition. There were 40 applicants, which in itself is kind of amazing for a Canadian audition for trombone. So, the first round happened in the morning and the afternoon, semi-finals started in the evening - I think at 7 p.m - and then there was a final round between two people. Quite a bit of discussion, quite a bit of time would go by. The personnel manager came and asked me if I minded if they took the screen down. Being the only female, the question was a gesture. At that time, there were no other female trombone players in orchestras in Canada, so it was a bit of a thing. The reason they wanted to take the screen down was so that they could have some section playing. So, I said “sure, let's go for it”. So, I don't know how many more rounds we had, but we started I believe at 7 pm and we didn't finish till almost midnight. I've never heard of anybody else having an audition experience like that since then. Obviously, some really heated opinions going on.

Max Cardilli (05:03): Since Kathy's audition, more and more women have won principal positions of traditionally “masculine” instruments.

Kathy Macintosh (05:08): It took a while for changes to be visible because I think when girls don't see women playing certain instruments, they don't necessarily think that it's an option for them. It's really powerful to see someone on stage that looks like you. I think it's just this kind of cultural stereotypes like, you know, boys wear blue and girls wear pink, girls play the harp and boys play the trumpet - but I think lots of boys look great in pink.

Maria Rachwal (05:54): There were some colleges that started to accept female pianists and even some instrumentalists - string players for the most part - in the early 20th century. But the only careers available to these women upon graduation were limited to teaching music lessons to boys and girls. Now ironically, I'd like to stress that



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in Canada the situation was a little bit different - for one thing in our country the orchestral tradition has developed much slower so there were logistical challenges like the lack of concert venues, the lack of high-quality instruments, the lack of high-level music teachers, so in Canada the early orchestras were open to women because these amateur orchestras needed players.

However, once these European conductors arrive in Canada and we see the second wave of orchestras, we see a shift in orchestra personnel. For example, in the Toronto Symphony Orchestra Frank Welsman had 12 women who played in the string section - but when Luigi von Kunits comes in in the 1920's he's from Austria and he envisions the new Toronto Symphony Orchestra as being modeled according to the European orchestras so he gets rid of all the women. So, there are female musicians in Canada who want to perform but there are no opportunities for them.

[MUSIC - 07:07]

Maria Rachwal (07:10): Ethel Stark was a woman of firsts. She was born in Montreal in 1910 into a Jewish family of Austrian descent and they were very passionately committed to human rights. She was the first woman to be accepted at the Curtis Institute of Music in Philadelphia, she was the first woman to be accepted into the conducting program under Fritz Reiner at the Curtis Institute, and she was the first Canadian woman to play on a nationwide broadcast in the US. She was also one of the most important Canadian violinists and conductors in the 20th century.

After graduating from the Curtis Institute of Music she goes on to discover how dismal the situation is for female musicians who want to play professionally. In 1940 she's in Montreal playing a recital and she met a group of about 10 string players who asked her to start a small chamber group to give them an opportunity to play music. Ethel Stark says "no way, this is not worth my time - however, if it is a full Symphony Orchestra with winds and brass and percussion, with 80 to 100 players, an orchestra that measures up to the highest standards that will be worth my time."

[MUSIC - 08:29]

Maria Rachwal (08:32): The women asked her "well how are we going to find those players?", because at the time there were limited female brass, woodwind and percussion musicians. So, Ethel says to them "well, if they don't exist then we have to make them - do you have a sister who sings a little bit about or a cousin who plays the piano a little bit? Go out in Montreal and find all the women you can find who can read a little bit of music and then you bring them to me and I'll assign to them what instrument I think they should play." So, the next day they come with all these women and Ethel Stark looks at each one and says "you look to me like you would be very suitable for playing the bassoon, and you look to me like you were born to play the French horn." So, in 1940 - the same year the women in Quebec won the right to vote - Ethel Stark



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gathered up this rag-tag ensemble of housewives, students, teachers, seamstresses, factory workers, maids and grandmothers - you know, any woman who could read a little bit of music and she taught them how to play. The women came from different social and religious backgrounds and their ages ranged from about 14 to 60 but despite these differences they came together to make music. Arthur Kaptainis of the Montreal Gazette writes “this was one of the most audacious acts of symphonic construction in history.” They built a full Symphony Orchestra in 10 days with no funding, with all battered instruments, because this was during the war and with women who for the most part had never set foot on the stage. The fact that it took only 10 days to form this orchestra - I think it's a sign that the timing was right. Women wanted a chance to perform in Symphony Orchestras.

I have here a first-hand account of what happened during the first rehearsal of the orchestra, just to give you an idea what kind of orchestra this was. “So in January 1940, my friend Mae called and asked if I was interested in joining a group of women who were forming a Symphony Orchestra. A few days later we had our first full rehearsal - I found out what cacophony really means! It was a dismal failure as far as I was concerned - how Miss Stark had the foresight to visualize the complete Symphony Orchestra of that night's effort is beyond me. Most of us had no experience whatsoever and had to start from scratch but preparations were exciting. I was thrilled beyond all expectations - the first performance was wonderful, the reviews were marvelous, and we were at least 10 pounds lighter from wear and tear.”

The women knew that this was the only chance that they would get to perform and to train to be orchestra musicians so they put all their heart and all their effort into it. They lugged their instruments around from rat infested basements to dimly lit warehouses. They had to rehearse in their kitchens, their bedrooms because they had no place of their own. Ethel Stark was very demanding and very bossy - she was even compared to the likes of Toscanini in personality. She made them work very hard and in seven months they gave their first concert at the chalet on top of Mount Royal. They played music like the Mozart Paris Symphony and The Carnival of the Animals by Saint-Saëns and an overture by Beethoven. For an orchestra who was very young these were very big pieces. Seven years later the Montreal Women's Symphony Orchestra became the first Canadian Orchestra to play in New York's Carnegie Hall on October 22nd 1947, and they also became the first Canadian Orchestra to play on American soil. Violet Louise Grant - one of the first black members of a Canadian Symphony Orchestra also becomes the first black woman to play in an orchestra in Carnegie Hall.

[MUSIC - 12:09]

Maria Rachwal (12:16): In the years that followed their creation they received hundreds of letters from people all over the continent wondering “is it really true that women can play the trombone”, “I have a daughter who really wants to play the cello, is it okay?”, “is it really true that women can play the flute and be successful at it?”.



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25 years later they disbanded and partly it was because of the advent of the screened audition. The women had trained with the orchestra, they had learned how to play in an orchestra and now they were ready to take their place in Symphony Orchestras all across North America. For example, [Violet Archer](#) was a musician, composer and teacher who played percussion in the Montreal Women's Symphony Orchestra. She became the chair of the Theory and Composition Department at the University of Alberta, and there is even a [park in Edmonton](#) named after her.

The early conceptions of the screened audition came from women in music. In 1938 there was a staged protest in New York City by about 150 female musicians of the American Federation of Musicians. They questioned why areas like medicine, the law, government - why are these areas open to women and why the Symphony Orchestra is not. They strategized ways of educating the public about this and they invited the media to cover the event. What resulted were several articles about what could be done to improve the situation of women in orchestra. One of these articles was written by someone named [Mary Dreier](#) - she was the President of the Trade Union at the time and she suggested that talent should be the main criteria for accepting musicians into orchestras and not sex. She suggested that a curtain be used on the stage to hide the identity of the musician and thus they would be able to pick the best player based on how well they sounded rather than what they look like.

[MUSIC - 14:02]

Maria Rachwal (14:06): All the women that play in Symphony Orchestras right now owe a little bit to Ethel Stark and the work of the Montreal Women's Symphony Orchestra. This orchestra started a women's movement in music and they shattered many gender and racial barriers that were commonplace at the time - and this really is their lasting legacy.

Max Cardilli (14:26): Since the widespread adoption of the screened audition in the 70's and 80's, there has been a large increase in the representation of women in orchestras. In fact, at the time of this recording the Edmonton Symphony Orchestra is split 50-50. However, according to a [2018 Orchestras Canada report on Leadership and Gender](#), among the top 26 professional Canadian orchestras, only 4 are led by female music directors.

[MUSIC - 15:06]

Cosette Justo Valdés (15:19): I think since women, we all are still in the fight of proving how good we can be.

[MUSIC - 15:27]

Cosette Justo Valdés (15:32): My name is Cosette Justo Valdés and I am the Edmonton Symphony Orchestra's Assistant Conductor and Community Ambassador. I



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come from a very small town San Germán is a very small town belonging to the province of Holguin in the east of Cuba. To be a conductor is very much like a love relationship. You have to give everything you have. You have to show who you are and either it will work with the orchestra or not - and yes, it's biased. It is because the orchestra will like you and will respond to you more or not - and sometimes it's not even based on how much you know, is what do you make happen. What do you inspire in those musicians so they give what they even didn't think they would be able to give?

[MUSIC - 16:36]

Cosette Justo Valdés (16:38): So, I think is biased, but at the same time that's the nature of it. I don't see it as a negative thing. I think it has to be like that, it's visual. Even musicians, when we have conversations like “how do you understand this conductor?” You don't study as a player the technique of conducting. You don't know what we are going to do and you respond to it - so how can you measure that? How can you make it as objective as possible?

[MUSIC - 17:18]

Cosette Justo Valdés (17:51): So, when I was studying in a University, we were more women than men, studying conducting in my class and we didn't think about that. It was not an issue, really. We took it for granted, right. I noticed in Germany that people advised me to cut my hair, like a guy, and that would be better because musicians wouldn't be distracted by my hair and things like that. So, I did it. There are some tiny rules that one could think “well it's tradition, it's elegance” - but it's kind of an imposition as well, right. So, I never really agreed with that. In the professional world, when you are applying, of course there is an issue with “are you going to get pregnant soon? Do you want to have children? Do you have children already? Are you healthy?” because there is unfortunately the cliché sometimes that women are weaker, right, and that we have always or personal issues or situations to take care of. So, I heard some comments like that.

I think for a woman that's difficult because if you want to be mother, if you want to have the responsibilities that typically - and now this is changing, now men are taking a very important step on staying at home so the woman can work. That's relatively new and that's beautiful, but it wasn't like that over 20 years ago, right.

[MUSIC - 19:24]

Cosette Justo Valdés (19:36): Inspiring girls is very, very important. We talk always about the auditions, or the applications, and if it's not music for getting that job. But we cannot forget there are many steps previous that if we don't take care of them not many women will be applying. So how can you have more women having the job, if you don't have many women applying? So, for that you have to have many women studying, and



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for before then you have to have many girls believing girls can do anything. And that has been, of course, the narrative for a long time already and I think we are in a very good place. Of course, we're in the best place, so far, regarding that.

My dream is that every child will have the same opportunities regardless of their geographical position, race, gender, and wealth. I think we are, in many parts of the world, really working very strongly for it. Edmonton is an example of it because we have the [YONA program](#), we have other programs, many ESO musicians give their time to teach or make it affordable for those that pay a little bit and I think that's very important. The opportunity to study, to believe, then at the end more women would be applying for the Music Director position in an orchestra.

When I conduct for the [Symphony for Kids](#), I have a long skirt. I would wear it because I want the girls to see a woman conducting, and from far away maybe they wouldn't maybe realize if I'm a woman or a guy. So, I try to make it very obvious and that I can be myself, as feminine as I am, or as warm as I am and that doesn't affect the interpretation of a particular piece. I think the music has such a strong character - each piece, each composer, each moment - that gender doesn't really play an important role as it doesn't for a player, for the sound, for how big is the sound or how delicate one could play.

I have visited groups of students, of children, I say students but they're eight years old and I remember meeting a girl. When I was talking about myself and my story and I was talking about boarding school, how I was missing my mom so much because I would see her twice a month. And she - I didn't know that girl had birthday that day and she had lost her mom. So, she wrote "I have learned today that it's okay to miss my mom and that I maybe one day could be a conductor." That's what we need - a girl that wants to be a conductor, and that nothing will stop her - then everything else will happen by itself.

Max Cardilli (22:51): In this episode you heard excerpts from [John Estacios's Triple Concerto](#), performed by the Edmonton Symphony, Angela Cheng, Juliette Kang and Denise Djokic, conducted by Bill Eddins.

Thank you to our wonderful guests Maria Rachwal, Kathryn Macintosh, and Cosette Justo Valdés who shared their time and voices for this episode.

In the show notes you can find links to Maria's book [From Kitchen To Carnegie Hall: Ethel Stark and the Montreal Women's Symphony Orchestra](#), [Kathy](#) and [Cosette's](#) bios on the Winspear Centre website where you can learn more about them, as well as a link to the ESO Recordings page where you can find the CD titled [A Concert for New York](#) available for purchase, on it - the music you heard in this episode. There is also a link to the Orchestras Canada report on [Leadership and Gender](#).



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This episode was produced in amiskwaciy-wâskahikan, also known as Edmonton on the traditional lands referred to as Treaty 6 Territory - a place that has been a meeting ground, travelling route and home for many Indigenous Peoples since time immemorial including the Cree, Métis, Dene, Nakota Sioux, Saulteaux, and Blackfoot whose histories, languages, and cultures continue to influence and enrich our vibrant community. The Edmonton Symphony Orchestra is dedicated to ensuring that the spirit of Treaty 6 is honoured and respected.

This episode was written and produced by me, ESO double bassist Max Cardilli. If you want to connect with me about the podcast you can write to eso.offstage@winspearcentre.com.

[MUSIC - 24:45]